

The Funeral

By Lisa Fisher Cazacu

My host, Dana, mother died of cancer about six weeks into my Romanian service. She had been diagnosed in January, just before my February arrival. But even with this devastating news, Dana still welcomed an unknown American into her home and into her life. In Romania, cancer is a death sentence since people usually wait too long to see a doctor about their symptoms. They know that if it is anything serious, they might not have money for the bribes required to receive good care.

Dana became her mother's caregiver. Every day on her way home from work, she would stop by her parents' house, fix dinner, and attend to her mother's needs. Then she would come home and fix dinner for Vlad and me. Never complaining, she did what was needed and still made me feel like a welcome member of the family.

When I arrived back in Ploiesti after my in-service training in Resita. Dana was not home, but Buni, the mother-in-law, was. This was unusual since Buni usually came in the morning and left when Vlad, Dana's son, went to school. Buni explained that Dana's mother had passed away and the funeral was the next day. My Romanian language skills were still pretty limited and I was not at all sure that I understood. She then showed me a flyer with the funeral information. Seeing the words on paper helped me to fully understand what had happened, and what was going to happen.

My instinct in situations like this is to do something, to bake, to order flowers, to do all the things that Americans do when someone dies. But in Romania, I had no idea what was culturally correct.

Buni wanted me to eat. Even during this difficult time, she had made delicious cabbage rolls for me, but I was not hungry. I thought about my own mother thousands of miles away, and how I would feel if this were my loss. Old feelings of personal sorrow bubbled up as I remembered how my father had died when I was a child. I ate Buni's special food that she had prepared with such unselfishness. I understood that "doing" during difficult times can be cathartic.

After dinner, I called the Peace Corps office to get more information (in English) about what was culturally appropriate in this situation. The duty officer walked me through the death and

funeral customs. I decided that I would not go to training the next day so I could attend the funeral. Arrangements were made for me to ride to the funeral with Leo, one of Dana's friends.

When Dana came home late that night I was already asleep. I was sure she had spent most of the night comforting her father and making funeral preparations. Romanians prepare the body of the deceased at home. The coffin is delivered to your residence, and the family cleans, dresses, and arranges the body for burial.

Sometime during the night, I became ill, shuffling to and from the bathroom numerous times. When I got up in the morning, Dana was already awake. I told her how sorry I was for her loss and embraced her. Despite her ordeal, she looked stunning. But even in her grief, she was still concerned about me. She had heard my trips to the bathroom in the night and was worried about my health. I assured her I was fine and would see her at the funeral.

Now I needed to convince myself that I was fine. I got out my Peace Corps-issued first-aid kit and took some stomach medicine. Eating was the last thing on my mind, so I settled for some water and a piece of bread.

I put on the only nice outfit I had brought from home, a green-and-black herringbone suit with a faux fur collar. Leo picked me up along with three of Dana's co-workers and we headed for the flower market. The Peace Corps office had explained the tradition of funeral flowers: You give only an *even* number of flowers for memorial services; *odd* numbers are for the living. Leo helped me select the right number of flowers. Dana's colleagues pooled their money and bought a wreath with a ribbon that said simply "Rest in Peace."

The funeral was held in the chapel at the cemetery. I looked around anxiously to see if there were "facilities" in the area but I saw none. I prayed that I would not need any. The chapel was small, about the size of a large bedroom in the U.S., and there were no pews. In Romanian churches, this is the custom. The simple pine coffin lay in the middle of the room, the lid off to the side. The mourners gathered around the coffin, quickly filling the small room.

Leo guided me through the ritual of placing half my flowers on one side of the body, the rest on the other side. Dana's mother looked peaceful in a simple black dress, her hands clutching a lighted candle, white lace surrounding her.

As I looked around at the other mourners, I realized immediately that I did not "blend" in. And it wasn't just because I was the only American. Although I had worn the only nice outfit I

had, I was definitely out of place in my very American dress-up outfit. Even Dana wore simple black slacks and a black shirt.

The service finally began. The flickering candles quickly heating the still air in the tiny room. I suddenly felt dizzy and lightheaded, but the thought that I might faint horrified me. I already attracted attention, just by being a redheaded American in my gauche clothes. I could imagine the attention I would get when I passed out at the funeral, but I made it through the service without incident.

The service was very emotional, with women wailing and men crying openly. At first this outpouring of sadness startled me, but soon I saw it as a touching requiem for the deceased soul. At the end of the service, in keeping with Romanian tradition, the family gave small tokens to the mourners. I received some fruit and a white linen handkerchief with a coin tucked inside (sort of like a toll to cross over to the other side). Sweet grains and wine were also offered.

After the service, they took the coffin outside to the burial site. The grave had been dug by hand early in the morning and the dirt was now piled along side. The lid was placed on the coffin and one of the cemetery workers began to nail the coffin shut. With each strike of the hammer, the death seemed more final. The coffin was lowered into the ground with ropes and the priest gave his final blessing. The service was over.

Later that evening, Dana came into my room and sat on the bed. She had brought me some tea to settle my stomach. She had just buried her mother, yet she was comforting me. As I sipped the tea, Dana asked me, "What are funerals like in America?"

I told her that grief was universal and that we each handled it in our own way. I explained that, in the U.S., we sat in pews in our churches and synagogues and dabbed our eyes and tried to hold back our tears. I told her how moved I had been by the beauty of her mother's service and the outpouring of emotion. We talked and cried together for almost an hour, and I hold that memory in my heart as if it happened yesterday.